

STAGES OF UNDERSTANDING

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All those who have closely and thoughtfully observed the phenomena of collective life around them cannot have failed to notice how slowly, and with such a long introductory phase, certain ideas penetrate opinion — and then, quite often, how astonishingly quickly the second phase comes along after this first one, when these ideas suddenly become widespread. Here, we are speaking of ideas and not of fashions. There is nothing of interest to say in this respect. Questions of fashion — whether this concerns clothing, gestures or habits — only serve to reveal “panurgism” — which is the spirit of imitation within everything that is mediocre. More or less favourable circumstances, such as the talent of the innovator, or a lucky chance... sometimes suffice to create success. When it is a question of ideas, and more particularly of novel ideas or reform, the phenomenon is worth observing and its development may be the object of curious discoveries.

In general, such ideas are not “launched”, for in such cases they disappear of their own accord within a certain time. They are, rather, “exposed”, with varying degrees of pomp, and it is fitting to greet them rather favourably, but always guarding a certain distance. Those who are in agreement will only produce platonic remarks or promises ; the public, however, pays considered attention to them, but cannot bring itself to undertake any sort of action. One could almost say that a physical incapacity separates acceptance of the idea and putting it into action. Many people are impressed and would *like* to act, but cannot, and if, by chance, they do organise some kind of action, then this is

soon to collapse, as if exhausted. One believes that this is a failure; silence sets in. And yet, this is by no means the case, for, after a little time, the idea emerges again, since it has some kind of innate power which until now has been lacking. It has become, in the terms favoured by the French philosopher Fouillée¹ “an idea-force”.

Upon close examination, and in most cases, the idea has undergone no change, nor has it gained weight, nor, even, have events or man given it anything new. Yet, it finds itself facing a transformed attitude — it is greeted quite differently. Perhaps, then, it was just that at the outset, it was not properly understood ?... No. This is not the case ; but then what is ?... Well — it was understood *in theory* — understood as if in *one dimension* — and now, we understand it as if it were a *prism*. In fact, all ideas are prismatic — so how did the change come about ? Was it merely a question of time, or was it an unperceived mental process ? It cannot be time alone — our common sense confirms that. One must, therefore, accept the theory of a mental process. This process, however, needs time, and very frequently, it takes place independently of any action or new effort on the part of those supporting the idea.

Frequently, too, it takes place unconsciously, without the idea being enlarged upon, or carefully re-examined. It is therefore, one may say, a process of mechanical reflection. It is a seed sown in the right earth and which has borne fruit with the slow, regal dignity inherent to this mysterious process: without realising it, the brain has brought forth the idea.

Popular language has a most expressive phrase to describe this phenomenon : it takes *form*. This is just what it does. But in fact, it is not the idea which has changed but rather he



who adopts it. He is now able to perceive its form, its identity ; until then he had seen but a flat image of it. And as long as one can see only the image and not the form of the idea, it cannot become an *idea-force*.

Many examples can be drawn from physical education — for instance, muscular development in Germany with Jahn² and his disciples, in England with Arnold³, in Sweden and in the United States ; in all these cases this form of physical education has undergone exactly the phases which we, have just described. And in the same way, the re-establishment of the Olympic Games was praised and even supported by people who approved of the idea through their instinct ; and who approved without understanding. They had not yet seen the “prism”. More recently, utilitarian doctrine — exposed officially on three occasions in Paris during the spring of 1901 and the winter of 1902 — lay dormant and then suddenly took on an almost universal momentum. This, then, is a striking example of the truth of the theory we have just put forth.

What practical conclusion can be drawn from this ? In an anthology of this kind, which is devoted to the praise of action, speculations of this nature are only authorised if a moral which is

of use to the reader can be drawn from them. On this occasion, the moral is quite clear. It is that under no circumstances should one disregard the time element when one is seeking to innovate or to reform. Without the passage of time, nothing durable may be founded or restored. This type of theory is expounded for the benefit of Paul Bourget⁴, but it is one thousand times more correct intellectually than sociologically. The famous novelist has not proved — contrary to history — that it is impossible to “miss out” on some social stages, whilst from daily experience it is out of the question to “miss out” on stages of understanding, especially the collective understanding necessary for a reform or creation to develop.

¹ Alfred Fouillée, French spiritualist philosopher, 1838- 1932

² Ludwig Jahn, father of German Gvmnastics, died in 1852.

³ Thomas Arnold, promotor of the English educational revolution, Headmaster of Rugby School from 1828 to 1842.

⁴ Paul Bourget, French spiritualist and novelist, 1852-1935, who sought to prove that “our acts follow us”.

In “*Essais de psychologie sportive*”, 1913.

